



You don't have to be a mother to celebrate

PROCESSED

APR 05 2017

LIBRARY



The INQUIRER

£1

www.inquirer.org.uk

The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7910 11 March 2017

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches 2001*

The Inquirer is published fortnightly
by The Inquirer Publishing Company
(2004), Registered Charity 1101039.

Editor M Colleen Burns MA

46A Newmarket Road

Cringeleford

Norwich NR4 6UF

ph: 01603 505281

e: inquirer@btinternet.com

Copyeditor Sarah Reynolds

Cover: Shutterstock photo

Articles express the views of their
writers. Submissions are welcome and
may be edited for content and length.
They should be emailed or typed and
should be the writer's original work or
be attributed appropriately.

Subscribe Annual subscriptions are
£35 with discounts for bulk orders.

Cheques payable to 'The Inquirer'.

Write to James Barry

24 Lodge Lane

Keymer, Hassocks

West Sussex, BN6 8NA

ph: 01273 844940

e: admin@inquirer.org.uk

Advertise for £6 per column cm, on
3-col page, plus VAT or £7.50 per
col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page
supplement is £200. One column on
a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page,
£75. A5 fliers may be inserted for
£95 plus VAT. Contact the editor for
details.

Births, marriages and deaths are
50p a word plus VAT.

Find out more about Unitarians

www.unitarian.org.uk

or email info@unitarian.org.uk

The General Assembly, Essex Hall

1-6 Essex Street

London WC2R 3HY

ph: 0207 2402384

Inquiring Words

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

— William Wordsworth



Last March at John Pounds Church, Portsmouth Unitarians held a congregational service for Mothering Sunday. Instead of an address, six women (above) were asked to speak about being a mother or what their mothers meant to them. They all spoke movingly and one of them, Pat Canis, read a poem she wrote for her mother.

For Mothering Sunday

While I sit here I think and feel
A word I'd like to say
About our mums who we all love
On this her special day.

When little there was lots of love
And lots of cuddles too
When we fell down we ran and cried
And rushed into her arms.

At school we were so busy
But our mums were there to make
A stable home with lots of love
A place our friends to take.

As teenagers we loved her still
But found it hard sometimes
To understand how she would feel
When we hit on hard lines.

When babies came how hard it was
To ask for her advice
We thought we knew it all I know
But to have her near was nice.

It doesn't matter what our age
Our mums will always be
The one we love a special way
From here to eternity.

We wouldn't be here without them

Mothering Sunday can be painful for some. But **Kate McKenna** finds a reason for all to celebrate.

Early on in my worship-leading life, I realised that I'd inadvertently booked to lead worship on Mothering Sunday. And I panicked. I panicked firstly because it's such a big day. I panicked secondly because, as a woman who is not a mother, and will not *be* a mother, I thought I had no particular right to be holding forth. And, thirdly, I panicked because, at that time the knowledge that I would not be a parent was a matter of huge personal grief.

But mainly it was reason number two. But then I thought some more about it, and realised that was actually quite ridiculous. I am not a mother, but then, quite a lot of us aren't mothers, and there are all sorts of reasons for that, and all sorts of feelings about it. Some of us, of course, are disqualified at the first hurdle, because we're men. Some of us made a conscious and positive choice not to be mothers. Others, for all sorts of reasons – physical, medical, psychological – were unable to be.

But there is one blindingly obvious way in which every single one of us, every single person who ever lived, in fact, has reason to at least acknowledge the fact that it's Mothering Sunday: Not one of us would be here were it not for the simple fact that we have two parents, one of whom, gave birth to us.

Now she may not have been the person who brought us up. We may have lost our relationship with her. We may have spent our formative years with her, but they may have been less than ideal. She may, of course, have died. But we were all given birth. I do know that I'm stating the obvious here, I really do. But it's one of those blindingly obvious facts that it's all too easy to ignore, when we should maybe occasionally take time to wonder at it.

Ridiculous images of mothers

The picture of motherhood, not only at this time of year, is massively idealised. From Victorian portraits to today's Hallmark cards, the picture we have of a 'mother' is, frankly, ridiculous. And that applies whether you're looking at it as a depiction of how you should be as a mother, or how you should have been mothered. Anything less than a cross between the Virgin Mary, Queen Victoria, and Nigella Lawson, just will not do. And being a Bad Mother is a far worse offence in the popular view than is being a Bad Father. But this is not the time to expand on that.

There's no doubt that how we were parented never stops affecting us. For good or bad, or more likely a mixture of the two, we are the product of how we were raised. And you know what? We're all here. We all made it into adulthood. Of course some of us will have far from ideal memories of our childhoods, and if we had a bad childhood, we're entitled to acknowledge our anger and pain. But we survived. We made it here, maybe bloodied and bruised, but we made it. We were parented well enough, physically, to thrive and grow. And the chances are even greater that those of us who are parents are parenting 'well enough'.

So maybe we should all, even those of us for whom today brings more pain than joy, mark the fact that it's Mothering Sunday in some way, even if only in our mind, and if it's only



For some women without children, Mothering Sunday can be painful. Shutterstock photo

for a brief moment. Because however flawed your mother was – and of course she was flawed. Or however flawed you are as a mother – and of course you are flawed: flaws are, after all, part of our human perfection – not one of us would be here without them.

A good day for Hallmark's cardboard

It's easy to dismiss Mothering Sunday as just another opportunity for Hallmark to sell overpriced bits of cardboard. It's just another over-commercialised trumped-up excuse for florists to add fifty percent to their prices. Though we don't have to play the game by the rules *they* want us to.

But like all those other 'celebrations' the card people have taken over, we know that Mothering Sunday has a good, strong social and theological history. Mothering Sunday is often the closest Sunday to the Feast of the Annunciation, or Lady Day on 25 March, when Mary is said to have received the news that she was to bear the son of God. In the Christian church, Mary is, of course, not only the most important mother, but the single most important mother. The conception of Jesus is a vital, precious moment. Very simple maths will disclose why late March is considered to be the time to celebrate her specifically.

Mothering Sunday was, in the early days of the church, the day of the year in which worshippers – and in those days, of course, that was everyone – was expected to return to their 'mother church', often a Cathedral. This would be the only day that families were able to get together – if you're on a minimum wage, and living in the 16th century, your employer is unlikely to give you a day off for your mother's birthday, but is equally unlikely to ignore a rule laid down by the church. This doesn't argue against the tradition that's more commonly known, of Mothering Sunday being the day domestic servants were traditionally allowed off to visit their mothers. It seems likely that families would have got together when visiting the Mother Church, and that this tradition was continued or re-started when the explosion of domestic service took place. There is another tradition, that children going home from service to visit their mothers would take with them a Simnel cake – which has now become an Easter tradition – another example of traditions slipping into one another.

(Continued on next page)

Hearts: a baptism of water and fire

(Continued from previous page)

Mothering Sunday is also held by some to honour a tradition of the 'mothering' of God. Julian of Norwich is thought to be the first western writer to have discussed god as a mother. Julian's thoughts would have been hugely radical in their time, going against everything that was thought of as true. And if it jars that she still refers to the mother god as 'he', we have to bear in mind that the very concept of god as anything other than a father, was entirely alien.

God the Mother

In fact, I don't think Julian was necessarily referring to a female God. I think she was referring to a still-male god, but one who could mother. And this is a vital distinction. I am no more comfortable with the concept of God as a heavenly mother than I am with God as a heavenly father. I think God is beyond gender, beyond human relationships, beyond that sort of semantic distinction. But in so far as we can personify God, we would be mistaken to not share Julian's thoughts on the maternal nature of some of God's actions.

The American – and, actually, far more common in other countries as well – tradition of Mothers Day is entirely different. And, again, contrary to common perception, not invented just for commercial reasons. It doesn't happen until May. But briefly, it was brought about largely by the efforts of a Unitarian woman, Julia Ward Howe, also responsible for writing 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic'. Ward Howe was a first-wave feminist, a pacifist, a worker for equality, and campaigner against slavery. The effects of the American Civil War horrified her, and she decided that peace was best brought about by women. Her aim was for women to come together and oppose war, and her second most famous piece, after the Battle Hymn was The Mother's Day Proclamation, and it's fantastic:

Arise then...women of this day! Arise, all women who have hearts! Whether your baptism be of water or of tears! Say firmly:

'We will not have questions answered by irrelevant agencies, our husbands will not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause. Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs'

From the voice of a devastated Earth a voice goes up with our own. It says: 'Disarm! Disarm! The sword of murder is not the balance of justice.' Blood does not wipe our dishonour, nor violence indicate possession. As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel. Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace. Each bearing after his own time the sacred impress, not of Caesar, but of God.'

Over-commercialised though it may well be, the traditions of mothering Sunday, and the sentiment at its heart, are worth celebrating. And life, after all, would be a whole lot less enjoyable if we didn't celebrate things – meaningful, significant things, or largely random, arbitrary things. I'm not even talk-



There are always things to celebrate, if we choose to.
Shutterstock photo

ing here about the big things – about weddings and childbirth – I'm talking about the small things, the things that mark out that the year is turning. In our house, and in no particular order, we have been known to make some sort of fuss over new year, valentine's day, shrove Tuesday, mother's day, birthdays, Easter, the Eurovision Song Contest, Chinese New Year, Pride, Halloween, Bonfire Night, half-birthdays, anniversaries, the first day of advent, and, of course, Christmas. We also mark paydays with a takeaway or a Marks and Spencer's ready meal. It's all entirely unnecessary, and arbitrary – what, after all, does Chinese New Year *really* have to do with us?

Celebrate the gift of life

I used to think it was all a bit silly. I was brought up that you mark Mothering Sunday with a bunch of daffodils in tin foil from Sunday school. It's saved me a small fortune over the years. But then I married someone who doesn't like to miss any opportunity to send a card, festoon the living room with banners, or serve shaped sandwiches on themed napkins.

And you know what, I actually think that's brilliant. Of course there's a risk of playing straight into the hands of the commercialisers, but you really don't have to. You can celebrate what you want, you can mark the turning of the months, and the difference between the days, in whatever way you see fit. You don't, whatever the adverts tell you, have to buy a card for everything, or mark things with material goods, just like you don't have to mark Mothering Sunday with the card with the longest rhyme and the most expensive bouquet Interflora have to offer. But being aware of the turn of the year is a vital part of human existence.

I'm increasingly of the opinion that feast days, festivals, arbitrary marks in the calendar though they may be, are worthy of celebration. Life is, of course, far more than a party. Life is a gift, and a treasure, and a solemn responsibility and a huge honour. But you will never be invited to a party as good as life. For all the pain, which is an essential part of life, the fact that we're here at all is worthy of celebrating. And if marking even arbitrary days helps us to be aware of that, and helps us to appreciate it, or helps us to remember that life isn't all 'got up had breakfast went to work came home', then that's all to the good.

(Continued on next page)

2017-18 president announced

Executive Committee Key Messages

13 and 14 January 2017

1. General Assembly President 2017/18

The Executive Committee are pleased to announce that the Rev Charles VanDenBroeder (right) will be nominated for the position of President of the General Assembly 2017/18 at the Annual Meetings in April 2017. Charles was proposed by the Manchester District Association (MDA).

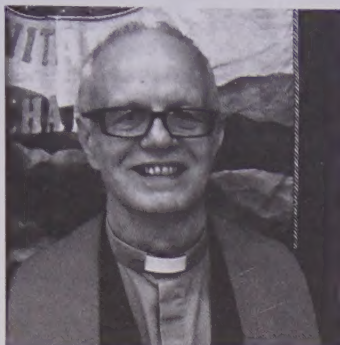
Charles trained at Manchester College, Oxford

from 1988-1990 and has had ministries in the Eastern, Yorkshire and Manchester Districts. He retired in 2015, however, has remained very active in Unitarian affairs, preaching at least once a month and serving on the MDA Executive Committee. Unfortunately the Executive Committee was unable to make any nomination for the position of Vice-President 2017/18 as no names were received for consideration.

2. Honorary Member of the General Assembly

The Executive Committee is pleased to announce that the Rev Cliff Reed will be nominated as an Honorary Member of the General Assembly at the Annual Meetings in April, in recognition of his considerable contribution to the Unitarian cause worldwide. Honorary Membership is awarded to those who have rendered long and consistent service nationally.

Cliff was active in the Unitarian Young People's League and followed his father into ministry undertaking his training at Unitarian College Manchester. His ministry was at Ipswich with Bedfield and Framlingham (1976-2012). He has made significant contributions to the General Assembly at national level, including being a member of the Objects Review Panel and serving as General Assembly President in 1997-98. He is well known as an author producing *Unitarian? What's That?*, worship material and historical writing. He was one of the founding group of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU).



3. Women's League

Rev Celia Cartwright, Joy Foster and Janet Poole joined the meeting at the request of the Executive Committee and gave a short presentation of the work of the Women's League. This included the contribution of its members to local congregations and its national work, especially for charities. The League had a long history and was looking to the future. Discussion took place on how the League could work with the Executive Committee to support the Vision for the future in 'Next Steps' and to improve communication and promote growth. The members of the Women's League were thanked for their contribution to the wider Unitarian and Free Christian Movement and it was agreed that the dialogue was useful and will continue.

4. Training and Education Development (TED) Project

A report was received on progress with an extensive programme of consultation underway to engage with and gather feedback from those with an interest in the wider Training and Education agenda. This, and other external research, has resulted in some initial conclusions which will guide the development of a framework or 'prototype' to be presented at the Annual Meetings.

5. Investment

A report was received from an independent Investment Adviser on the General Assembly's current approach to investment, as recommended by our legal advisers at the last EC meeting. An approach was agreed which will strengthen the capacity of the Executive Committee to exercise its stewardship of the considerable financial resources of the General Assembly. Work on a revised ethical policy will also be taken forward.

6. Annual Meetings – Future arrangements

A report was received on the results of the survey on possible changes to the arrangements for future Annual Meetings. A total of 126 responses were received. Overall there appears to be a strong desire for change and the Executive Committee will be bringing a motion to the 2017 Annual Meetings seeking support for changes to the length and format of future Meetings. If approved, this will require proposals to be presented to the 2018 Annual Meetings, including amendments to the GA Constitution and By-laws.

7. Annual Report and Accounts 2015/16

The Annual Report and Accounts for 2015/16 were approved.

Schmaltz can be good for us, sometimes

(Continued from previous page)

And Mothering Sunday, for a multitude of reasons, is a really good one to start with. Mark it in your own way, whether that's acknowledging it with just a bunch of daffodils in tin foil, or an all-day party with gifts and balloons, or whether that's by taking a quiet moment to think of the wonder and the mystery of the fact that we were all given birth to. That one day, whether that was relatively recently, or many many years ago, one woman, whether she is still with you and a part of your life, or whether she is no longer with you, and whether she parented you or didn't, and whether your memories of her are fond or painful, or both, that one day, one woman gave you birth, gave you life, invited you into the world.

And if that's schmaltzy, that's okay. Schmaltz, like partying, is okay sometimes.

Take a moment to think of the one message you can send your mother. There are a million things you may want to say to her. Some of them angry, some of them tender, some heart-breaking and some so full of joy that you can hardly comprehend it.

But there's one message we can all send to our mothers. Some of us are lucky enough to be able to tell her right now, in person. Some can call her, some send a card. Some can send it in a prayer, or a thought, or a meditation. We can send the message whether we have any faith in her receiving it or not.

And that one message, the one thing we all owe to our mothers is, 'thank you'. But it's both more specific, and more general, and both simpler and more mind blowing than just a thank-you. We've said it dozens of times, at dozens of parties.



Just briefly, hold your mother in your mind, and in your heart, with all her faults, and with all her failings, and just silently, briefly, send her this message: 'thank you for having me'.

The Rev Kate McKenna (left) is minister at Bury.

Here's to Civil and Religious liberty

By Dot Hewerdine

For nearly a year I have travelled around the United Kingdom representing the General Assembly and bringing greetings from our wider membership to communities who often have little contact with others – despite the increasing use of social media.

On a few occasions I have been privileged to raise a toast to one of the principles which surely bind us all.

I refer, of course, to that of Civil and Religious Liberty the world over. Unitarian historian Alan Ruston, told me, 'Historically it was a toast given generally as everyone, whatever their theological hue, could support it.'

And apparently, 'The British and Foreign Unitarian Association long had a standing committee who sought its introduction and gave an annual report on infringements. From the 1850's the columns of *The Inquirer* shows how often was the toast delivered at gatherings.'

We are part of a global community

Well, maybe we don't need to be so prescriptive. But it is worth remembering that we belong to a wider, national – now indeed global – community where civil and religious liberty is still not universally given.

More than three-quarters of the way through my year as President of The General Assembly, I welcome this opportunity to tell you a bit about what I have been doing and, more importantly, what I have been hearing and seeing.

First the 'doing!' Well, I've been sitting on a lot of trains, driving on busy roads, preparing services, speeches, workshops and messages, and I've been 'doing' a lot of eating – oh, so much delicious eating.

I have also participated in many meetings and conferences of which the Conference of the International Council of Unitarians & Universalists (ICUU) stands out for many reasons and on many levels. It vividly brought home to me, through contact with Unitarians from places such as Kenya and Burundi, that though we formally and legally enjoy civil and religious liberty in this country, others still face the dangers consigned to the past here, in order to practise their liberal faith.

I have also observed meetings of our Executive Committee where our elected members have worked so hard to identify and facilitate real and effective action based on the Next Steps accepted at our Annual meetings in April.

New framework for education

I am involved in the proposal to develop a modular framework for training, education and professional development that will be accessible by a larger number and variety of people than has been the case up to now. It's called the Training and Education Development project – known affectionately as TED. It stems from the document, 'A Vision for Our Future' and the 'Next Steps' leaflet which followed it and was accepted by our General Assembly at our 2016 meetings.

I'd like to focus on two aspects of the Vision and Next Steps which are closely linked. These are encapsulated in the Vision



Unitarians from all over the UK attended a meeting held to develop the vision document, out of which came 'Next Steps'. Photo by John Hewerdine

document in these words:

'We must develop personal leadership.' and 'We must provide Ministry (capital M) that enables ministry (small m)'. (I use capital and small M's they are shown in the document.)

How can we do either of these things if we don't first identify what we are 'leading' or how we need to be 'ministering'?

Some of you will already be aware that when the Executive Committee agreed to the Training and Education Development Project, the key message was: 'Ministry in all its forms' is a key element of 'From Vision to Action: Next Steps' with the aim to ensure the provision of the best possible ministry for congregations. The Executive Committee of the General Assembly (EC) has agreed that we must move with some urgency to develop a modular framework for training, education and professional development that will be accessible by a larger number and variety of people; some of whom may then seek entry into professional Ministry.

The need for action *now* has been emphasised.

A short paragraph covering a mighty project which could be the culmination of many other projects over several decades; projects which were, in some ways, before their time and which, to the sadness and frustration of many involved in them, seemed to end up on shelves gathering dust.

Reviving old projects

The President's Commission, the Development Commission and Ministries, the Foy Society's 'Not Just Every Sunday,' the Development Skills Training Course, 'future ministry' to name but a few – the list is long.

What all these had in common was an understanding that the country is changing; that no longer do people grow up into a pattern of going to church every Sunday and being part of a congregational community.

They also acknowledged that the leadership of our congregations would need to change too.

Barbara Wells in the book *Salted with Fire* says:

'In talking about ministry today, one never just means the professional clergy, but the mission and program of the church – its ministry. Ministry is certainly the most important aspect of any church. Yet ministry as we know it is changing dra-

(Continued on next page)

How can we ensure it continues?

(Continued from previous page)

matically and will need to continue to change if we are to move with strength into the future.

'How that ministry is changing was described best to me as "giving the ministry away."'

In order to lead into the future, a future we can hardly imagine as the world changes so quickly, a minister now needs to develop additional skills, to be able to partner the congregation in its ministry or even focus the ministry outside the building.

'And the question then is, "Does our current education and training of Ministers, really equip them for the ministry required in the future?"'

'And the next question, "Do we have the means to equip our congregational lay leaders and the members of our congregations to collaborate in different models of ministry and service to the community in ways that are relevant to the modern world?"'

Developing leadership

This new project excites me as it aims to begin to provide answers to these questions, and to suggest ways we can develop a modular approach which eases the way into developing leadership skills and identifying that moment when a person realises they have a calling towards Ministry – with a capital 'M'.

The Rev Tony McNeile writes in the Vision document paper: 'Our ministry should be about leadership, not just spiritual leadership, but groups leadership, community leadership. We should not expect to find all these leadership skills invested in one person but be prepared to facilitate training of our own members and to work collaboratively with other churches and organisations.'

So, what next?

It's fine to have aspirations, to be excited by the vision of the future which our discussions and consultations inspire. But how are we going to get there and, what will it look like when we do?

Challenges ahead

Of course, we will never 'get there' since needs change as the world changes. Nor can we envisage what 'it' would look like if we did.

But we can ensure that what we do today will enhance rather than hamper the actions of future generations. Will we be brave enough to accept the need to sow seeds of change that might for *us* be uncomfortable?

We have our challenges, of course we do. Many of our congregations are small; with dedicated members who are finding it increasingly difficult to offer time and energy to support local congregations as was done in the past.

We must be open to trying new things, to learning from our mistakes, and to keep on trying.

The Rev Nicky Jenkins said this in the Vision document:

'When we look at examples of successful leaders in our



General Assembly President Dot Hewerdine spoke at the recent FUSE festival. Photo by John Hewerdine

church who have brought about growth, we tend to ask them, "What did you do?" So they give us a long list of activities and innovations and we try to do the same but it doesn't work for us. Why is that? Perhaps we asked the wrong question. Perhaps we should have asked, "Who were you?"'

Media Mogul, Ted Turner said, 'Either lead, follow or get out of the way!'

Are you a leader? Or a follower?

Should we all ask ourselves if we are in the way?

Did you hear the story of a college application one part of which

was directed to the applicant's parents? Well, one of the questions was, 'Would you consider your child to be a leader or a follower?'

After much deliberation, the father wrote that he felt his son, although very much a unique individual, was really more of a follower.

Not long after, a letter of acceptance arrived from the college, accompanied by a note from the Registrar, welcoming his child. 'We feel he'll fit in especially well,' the letter read, 'as he will be the only follower in a class of 249 leaders.'

A leader? A follower? Or in the way?

I know I have been all three at different times in my life and in different contexts.

And I have been something else as well. I have been a manager. What is the difference between a leader and a manager? It's been said, 'A leader does the right thing. A manager does things right.' And we need both in abundance.

Ministry which enables ministry

If we want to be a 'faith that matters', we will need to develop personal leadership in differing styles in order to provide Ministry that enables ministry.

In a paper titled: 'We must provide Ministry that enables ministry' in the Vision for our Future document, Stephen Lingwood, minister at Bank Street, Bolton, quoted from Hymn 181 in *Sing Your Faith*:

*Wake, now, my vision of ministry clear;
brighten my pathway with radiance here;
mingle my calling with all who would share;
work toward a planet transformed by our care.*

A planet transformed by *our* care!

Let's emphasise the *our* and find ways of offering what we are able to and work towards civil and religious liberty the world over.

We may be a minority but my goodness we can make a difference, as we have so often in the past – if we work together.

And remember the words of the writer, Vesta Kelly, who said, 'The snowflake is one of nature's most fragile things, but just look at what they can do when they stick together.'

Dot Hewerdine is president of the Unitarian General Assembly. This is an excerpt of a talk she delivered at the recent Festival of Unitarians in the South East (FUSE). More coverage of FUSE will appear in the next Inquirer.

We should be planting in good soil

By Stephen Lingwood

It seems to me that Unitarians really like plans. I've been involved in the British Unitarian community for about 15 years (a lot less than some people) and in that time there have been lots of plans. Going back further I'm sure there have been even more. I've sat through Annual Meetings and heard about new leadership structures, plans for growth, consistent identity, five-year strategic priorities, vision for the future, and now 'Next Steps'.

A lot of plans. No doubt a lot of work from committed volunteers and staff. We've planned and planned and planned. But, as pointed out recently in *The Inquirer* by Ant Howe ('Going through the Motions', 14 January) these plans have really, come to almost nothing. Pointing this out might seem defeatist, or negative, but it is really just honest.

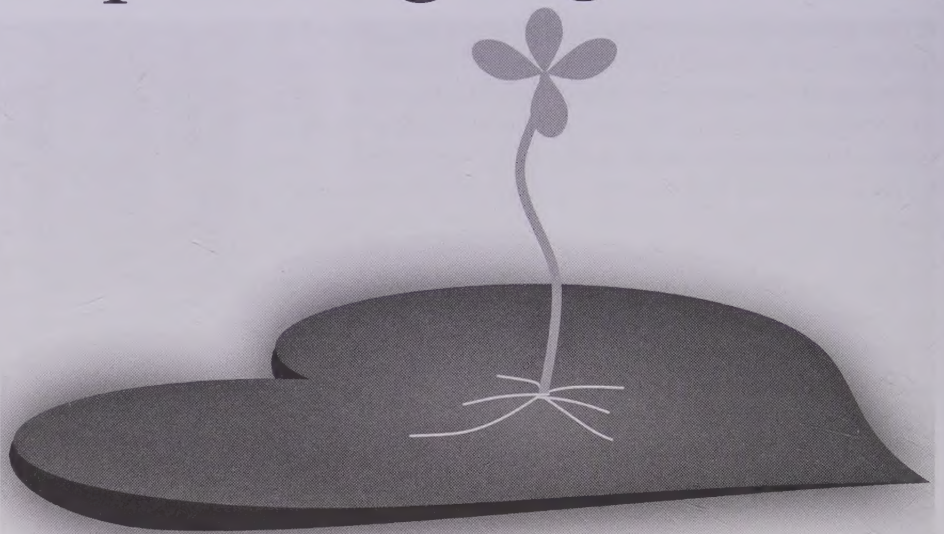
There's a story Jesus told that I keep coming back to. He said something like this, 'Someone went out and planted a lot of seeds, but some fell on the path, some fell in rocky ground, and some couldn't grow because of weeds. Only the seed that fell on good soil, went down deeply and put down roots, produced a good crop.'

As I think about this I can't help wondering, are we planting seeds that keep refusing to grow? And if so is that because of the soil rather than the seeds?

There's nothing wrong with planning for the future, thinking strategically, setting priorities. But perhaps such things only work if they are rooted in good soil.

The best writer on the practice of evangelism that I know of is Bryan Stone, a professor at Boston University in the United States. When I studied in Boston he was one of my professors. To my eternal regret I never took one of his classes, though I did once have a couple of drinks with him in the university pub. One of his central insights that I keep returning to is 'the Christians who evangelise are more important than the methods they use.'¹ The messenger is actually more important than the message. This seems to be something we don't think about very much. We become so obsessed with methods, with the latest plans, technological trends, outreach methods, that we rarely turn our attention to *us*. What if what matters is not the seeds (techniques) but the soil – the church – the concreteness of our community life?

Stone writes that evangelism is the practice of giving the world something to see, touch and try. And the world should see 'a community of discipline in which the Spirit can be discerned... [A community with] a distinctive set of habits, practices, disciplines, and loyalties that together constitute a visible and recognizable pattern before a watching world.'²



Pixabay image

What does that look like? Stone suggests something like this:

'In that people's love of enemies and refusal of vengeance the world sees the circularity of its own violence. In its abundance, sharing, and joy the world sees the artificiality of its own scarcity and competition. In its care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan and in its welcome of the stranger, the world sees the arbitrariness of its own fears and suspicions. In the church's pattern of reconciliation and forgiveness the world sees the irrationality of its own hostility and divisions.'³

And so perhaps our first questions need to be, 'Are we a joyful people? Are we a loving people? Are we a hospitable people? Are we a people of prayer?' Because I tend to think if we aren't then effective use of Facebook ain't going to make a lot of difference.

Perhaps we would think it rather strange if the Unitarian General Assembly's Executive Committee told us, 'love the world, and be joyful.' And perhaps it's not the EC's role to do that. Perhaps they are just the administrators that can provide resources for us to do it. But I know that loving the world and being joyful is the most important thing any of us can do for our communities, and if we don't do that, the seeds will soon get choked by weeds.

The seed must be planted in deep soil of 'a distinct set of habits' and watered by a powerful spirituality. That's the only path of transformation I know. That's what is witnessed to by so many spiritual traditions. And yet I find myself cringing when the video we put out to promote ourselves starts by saying, 'We're not about... prayer'. We're not about prayer? If that is true, can I suggest that in itself might be precisely our problem?

No doubt we will keep throwing these seeds about. But I can't see any growth happening until we cultivate a soil that is formed of an abundant, radical, loving and joyful spirituality. In my life, in my ministry, and in my congregation, that's what I'm going to be prioritising, whatever grand plans are happening year after year at a national level.

Stephen Lingwood is minister at Bank Street, Bolton.

¹ Stone, B., *Evangelism after Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 316

² Stone, 315-316, 317

Breaking down barriers in Hull

A joke circulating in Hull claims that there is a nationwide shortage of those orange plastic barriers used to close off roads or steer pedestrians away from dangerous building work. 'Why the shortage? We've got them all here in Hull!' Sure enough, there is lots of noisy work belatedly going on to prepare sites for the City of Culture, running for the year 2017. Nonetheless, we enjoyed a brief visit in February and highly recommend it.

The tall statue of poet Philip Larkin greeted us at the station. The Royal Hotel has seen better days but is convenient and the receptionist had an unusual name on her badge. I try to help immigrant workers feel that they are welcome in the UK, despite the reported rise in hate crime. I make friendly conversation by mentioning an unusual name when I see one, then try to guess its origin. I've done this in restaurants and supermarkets, though our local Tesco has noticeably fewer migrant workers.

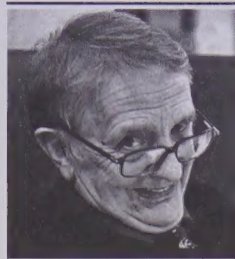
I got this idea from the Rev Gordon Oliver, now retired minister in Cape Town, and active during apartheid days. This receptionist's badge read 'Oumi', and I guessed that it might be Israeli. 'No. Moroccan.' 'What does it mean?' I asked. She gave an embarrassed laugh. 'It means Little Mama!' and the conversation ended with smiles all round. I hoped she hadn't seen news reports from across the North Sea, where the ultra-right Netherlands politician Geert Wilders recently spoke of 'Moroccan scum'. What do victims of such abuse feel when they hear it?

Similar thoughts crossed my mind in Hull's excellent Wilberforce House Museum, telling of the man and the campaign to abolish slave trading. I stared with quiet horror at the array of chains, iron collars and manacles, as well as texts and pictures spelling out this grotesque industry. Slaves packed into stinking ships, survivors suffering violent abuse and humiliating, intimate body examinations before going on the auction block. It was a relief to see Josiah Wedgwood pictured as an abolitionist, though alas not as a Unitarian. Standing nearby, I noticed another visitor, of black African or Caribbean origin, I think. I wondered what he was feeling.

Thoughts of crossing barriers and distances between cultures were in my mind while watching *Lion*, the excellent film that in my view deserved several Oscars. (*Spoiler alert – do not read further unless you want to know the ending – Ed.*) Based on a true story it tells of Saroo, a 5-year-old boy from a dirt-poor family in a remote Indian village, who falls asleep on a train from which he and his brother are stealing coal. The train does not stop until Calcutta, over 1,000 miles away.

Lost and alone he ends up among the city's vulnerable street children, scavenging on a filthy garbage tip. The acting is touchingly convincing, especially the portrayal of Saroo as a boy. See him run! Weep that he needs to run. Rescued at last he goes via an orphanage to adoptive parents in Australia who love and care for him into adulthood. Twenty years on, he spots and smells jalebi, a delicacy he remembers from his childhood.

It stirs his impulse to rediscover his family, in faraway India. The eventual, tearful reunion with his mother, with whom he no longer shares a language, is enthralling. Don't miss it. Take hankies.



Funny Old World

By John Midgley

Pondering childhood memories of food, who remembers troach? A true Brummie delicacy, this is an aniseed flavoured boiled sweet with medicinal properties, good for a sore throat. I had forgotten it until a casual mention brought back memories of post-war sweet rationing. Then there is the renowned, 'you either love-it-or-hate-it' Marmite. It has nutritional value as a source of vitamin B, was issued to WW1 soldiers including my father, WW2 POWs, and fed to nourish children like me.

At school I was amused to learn *marmite* as a French word meaning cookpot, and I am among those who cook with it and enjoy it despite its unattractive, industrial appearance. Those who hate it will like the story from journalist Stuart Maconie in *Adventures on the High Teas* (2009).

Visiting Burton-on-Trent, where it was created by 19th century breweries, he asked for a slice of Marmite on toast in a café. The girl serving him pulled a sour face. 'We don't serve it,' she said. 'But you make it here,' he told her. 'We make ball bearings here and I don't eat them either.'

I also have boyhood memories of eating whale meat. I was reminded of this in Hull's excellent whaling exhibition in the Maritime Museum. Hull has no slave trading reputation to come to terms with, unlike other ports, but there was a whaling industry for 100 years or so. With feelings of admiration for the courage of the men who undertook this work, mixed with a squirming sensation at the sight of the grotesque harpoons used to slaughter these amazingly beautiful, intelligent and important creatures, I was glad to see the display for the Save the Whale campaign, which continues.

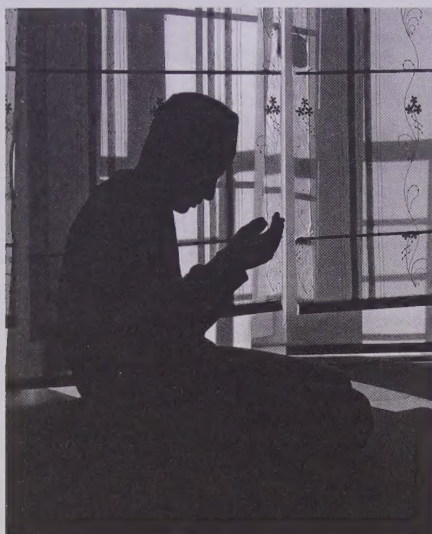
Another Hull poet, Andrew Marvell MP (1621-1678), stood scowling, it seemed at the barriers around him, as workers installed additional seats and tables in a quiet square, where picnickers can read his sonnet, *To His Coy Mistress*. A stroll along the mysteriously named street, The Land of Green Ginger into Bowlalley Lane, where once stood an early Unitarian Chapel, is compulsory.

The renovated Ferens Art Gallery is worth a visit and outside it stands *The Blade*. This comes from an electricity-generating windmill, is 75 metres long, 3.5 metres in diameter at the base and weighs 25 tonnes. Locally made, it is the largest single-cast product in the world, forming a giant white exhibit, resting on brackets and sprawled across Victoria Square. Queen Victoria has her back to it, but visitors stop and stare, children run under it and reach up to touch and the gulls sit cheerfully on top.

It made me smile and left me resolved to return for more culture later in the year, when, I hope, all the barriers are gone.

The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.

Letters to the Editor



Mosque open house was wonderful

To the Editor:

I applaud all interfaith activities and just want to add another aspect. On Sunday, 5 February, many Mosques opened their doors to visitors. Some of us went to the local Medina Mosque where a huge number of visitors were welcomed offered food and drink, tours and talks. We saw the Muslims at prayer (Do they really pray 5 times a day?) and heard excellent talks on the Muslim faith.

All questions were answered and I

found the answers reassuring: Sharia law is subordinate to British law, men and women are equal, (this I do wonder about) no person can tell another person they are destined for hell – that is for God to decide. This is a bit of a relief. The whole atmosphere was quite wonderful and I imagine many folk had come to show solidarity in the light of Trump's disgraceful antics I felt proud of our citizens. Also that week, our minister and a young attender went to London to join the protest march against Trump. Sometimes if interfaith services are hard to arrange, it is a simple matter to attend a Mosque or join a march.

Brenda Knopf
Highfield

Can you help out the Lindsey Press?

To the Editor:

Dear readers,

Do you find Lindsey Press (LP) publications stimulating and a useful resource for your church? If so, you might be the person to help the LP commission and produce new books. There are some technical skills in book production – editing, design, marketing – but, the priority is enthusiasm to have more good LP books. The panel

meet three times a year – for half a day at Essex Hall – and have email conversations in between. We pay all travelling expenses to meetings.

If you think you might be just the right person and would enjoy this, drop me a line at dcdawson3@hotmail.com

David Dawson

Convenor, Lindsey Press Panel

Minister with growth ideas told 'no thanks'

To the Editor:

Since the article on growth from the Rev Ant Howe (*Inquirer*, 14 January) I have been haunted by the following tale from my late husband, the Rev Nick Teape's student days at Manchester College Oxford.

Students were occasionally asked to take a service at some distant chapel in the Oxfordshire countryside. Nick spent a very long time on his bike finding his objective.

After the service he put forward a few ideas which would make them more visible. These were quietly received. He was rendered speechless when suddenly a lady stood and made the astonishingly loud declaration, 'But, Mr Teape, strangers might come in!'

J Teape
Ipswich

Peter B Johnson, journalist and Lewisham member, is missed

Peter Brierley Johnson, 1925-2016

We recently learned of the death of Peter B Johnson, who was a member of Lewisham Unitarians along with his German refugee wife Elfi (who died in 2008) from the 1970s to 2009, when he returned to Bradford to live with his son's family.

He served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War, after which he worked as a journalist for local newspapers in Bradford. He later worked as an international correspondent for Reuters and the BBC, which took him to London, Bonn, Moscow, and Berlin.

As a roving reporter he covered major historical events such as the Agadir earthquake, which devastated Morocco in 1960, and the trial of Nazi Lieutenant Colonel Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem,

Eichmann was convicted of war crimes in 1962.

A firm Humanist Unitarian, during services Peter often took notes in shorthand into a small notebook he was never without, so that he could discuss points in depth with the minister afterwards.

He served on the Committee at Lewisham faithfully, including serving as Chairman, and played hymns for services on the piano from time to time.

Peter's favourite hymn was *Finlandia*/Song of Peace (Hymns for Living no 226 – 'This is my song, O God of all the nations; a song of peace for their lands and for mine.'

– *Lori Winters, Chairperson,
Lewisham Unitarian Meeting*

Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to inquirer@btinternet.com Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF

Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes. Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only, and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body.

Church Insurance



Specialist
knowledge
and experience,
when you need it most.



edwards
insurance
brokers

Working closely with a panel of specialist insurers,
we do our utmost to ensure churches countrywide have the right insurance at the best price.

With both Congregational and Ansvar in particular, we have negotiated various free enhancements in cover,
exclusively for those churches using our services.

The General Assembly, Essex Hall, The Nightingale Centre and the majority of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches
and Fellowships are already seeing the benefits of our dedicated services at no additional cost to themselves.

We believe that churches lie at the heart of our communities and that their complex range of properties, ministries
and requirements are best understood and serviced by our specialist team.

Our vast experience in this sector allows us to select the most appropriate cover for you.

“The General Assembly is pleased to have had the opportunity to work closely with Edwards Insurance Brokers
over recent years. We have improved our own insurance arrangements, but more importantly, we have seen
many of our congregations benefit from a more professional approach to their insurance cover.”

-Derek McAuley, Chief Officer of The General Assembly of Unitarian
& Free Christian Churches

Visit our stand at the General Assembly 2017, to see how we can help you.

☎ 01564 730 900 @ church@edwardsinsurance.co.uk

🌐 www.edwardsinsurance.co.uk



WHEN HOPE IS DIM...

*"For everything its season, and for
everything under heaven its time...
a time to weep and a time to laugh;
a time for mourning and a time for dancing..."*

- Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 4

When hope is dim,
When we are in darkness,
When the world's gloom
invades our souls,
We kindle our chalice-flame
to say that, in spite of everything,
We still have hope,
We still have light,
We still have the radiance that
filled the great souls of our kind,
and so
We gather here in love to worship.

Cliff Reed